THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Remember

April 18, 1999
John M. Buchanan

Part of us wants to say, let's forget about it. It's all over. . . we thought about a better world, imagined a new community of love, dreamt about a time when all people would live together in peace. But the truth has caught up with us. . . the bitter truth that our youthful hope has been crucified.

And still—the other stories remain. Stories about a few people who saw it differently, stories about gestures of forgiveness and healing, stories about goodness, beauty and truth. And as we listen to the deeper voices in our heart we realize that beneath our skepticism and cynicism there is a yearning for love, unity and communion that doesn't go away even when there are so many arguments to dismiss it as sentimental childhood memories.

Henri J. M. Nouwen
With Burning Hearts

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Acts 2:14, 36-41
Luke 24:13-35

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road. . .?"
(Luke24:32)

Dear God, sometimes we forget that because of what happened at Easter, everything is fresh and new, and that our lives are full of possibility and potential. Sometimes we live as though nothing is possible: that our fate is to live day after day in routine. So, dear God, do startle us with your presence in our lives, and open us to the good news of your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a ritual in which I regularly engage which I enjoy, but which always mystifies me a little bit when I reflect on it. When I have an enjoyable experience, see a baseball game, hear a concert, watch a movie, I like to read about it later. Many of you will know that one of the high and holy days in this city, on at least the North Side of it, happened last Monday afternoon when the Cubs returned to Wrigley Field. Some of you will not be surprised to know that even though I had an important meeting at 3:00, I was there for 4 1/2 innings. It is for some of us an important occasion, a pivotal event in the rhythm of time moving from year to year. Opening Day, along with Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, is a way to keep and know time, to discern time's significance by its rhythmic content. The content last Monday afternoon wasn't so hot. But I enjoyed the day, and, as always, one of the best parts of the experience was to read about it in the paper the next morning.

I know that I am not alone in this peculiar ritual. It's fun, somehow, to read a baseball box score of a game you saw: the batting order, the hits, runs, errors—it's all there in fine print, just like you saw it. Somehow the experience of seeing the game is sealed, authenticated, pinned down, by the historic memory of the game represented by a box score. It's true as well about a concert you attend, or a movie. The morning after review may surprise you, as it often does me, by telling you that what you thought was a glorious performance by the Chicago Symphony or Mick Jagger was actually seriously flawed. But nevertheless, to recall it is to experience it again and perhaps more deeply.

Memory seals and oftentimes clarifies experience and frequently allows us to see significance in experiences that we didn't get at the time. I suspect that a lot of what is in the Bible became more clear in the remembering and retelling and writing than it was at the moment. I'm pretty sure that the people who experienced the crucifixion of Jesus first-hand did not experience it as a gesture of God's love. I suspect that Moses' experience with the burning bush and the plagues and the escape through the sea all became clearer to him later as he remembered them.

Professor Fred Craddock says there are three ways to know an event: anticipating the event, experiencing the event and remembering the event. In anticipation we are hindered by not knowing what exactly is going to happen. You can eagerly anticipate the game, concert or movie but who knows how great or awful it will be. At the moment, Craddock says, we are hindered by the clutter and confusion of so much happening so fast. But in remembering—recognition, realization and understanding happen. (*Interpretation, Luke,* p.287)

It's why we hurry to the photography shop with our film as soon as we return from the trip, and then hurry back to get our pictures and eagerly open them, right there on the counter, to see what just happened to us a few days earlier, to begin the process of sealing and clarifying the experience by remembering it.

On the first day of the week after the death, by crucifixion, of Jesus of Nazareth, two of his followers began the process of sealing the experience they had with him by remembering. They had decided to go for a walk. They had been hiding in Jerusalem following the devastating events of the week before: the deepening crisis and conflict, his being drawn into the conspiracy by his enemies, his arrest and trial and humiliation and death. It was for them a crushing experience, an experience of profound personal loss. They had come to love the man, this strong, good, exciting, compelling and vulnerable human being who seemed to so love the world, and them, that everything was fresh and new. And now, at 33, he was dead. In addition to the larger crisis which his crucifixion represented, there was the matter of their personal pain, their grief.

So two of them went for a walk. They're remembering. They're doing exactly what you need to do in grief. You need to talk. After the funeral the family needs to gather and remember and talk about the deceased and tell stories and share vignettes and laugh and cry together. The slow but sure process of healing actually starts around the kitchen table after the funeral when family and friends gather and say "Remember how she used to . . . remember the time when . . ."

So that is what these two are doing, Cleopas and an unnamed companion walking toward Emmaus. There is a bit of mystery here. Why is the companion unnamed and who exactly was Cleopas? Furthermore, the location of Emmaus has never been determined. The name is familiar: there is the inevitable tourist site in Israel today where thousands of pilgrims recreate the walk but the people who know assure us that the location of Emmaus remains a mystery.

So maybe Emmaus is where you go when you can't stay in Jerusalem any longer. Maybe Emmaus is wherever you go when you need to walk and think and grieve and remember. And maybe the two people on the road are anyone who ever lost a dear one, a beloved, a dream, a hope, a plan. . . anyone who ever had to live with unrealized expectation, with gnawing, relentless grief. "Sometimes it seems that life is just one long series of losses," Henri Nouwen wrote. "When we were born we lost the safety of the womb, when we went to school we lost the security of family life, when we got our first job, we lost the freedom of our youth. . . when we grew old we lost our good looks, when we became weak or ill we lost our physical independence, and when we die we will lose it all. The losses that settle themselves deeply in our hearts and minds are the loss of intimacy . . the loss of innocence, the loss of love. . .the loss of our dreams. . . ."(*With Burning Hearts,* p.25-26)

see F. Buechner

Maybe Emmaus is where you go when your sense of loss weighs you down and while you walk to Emmaus you remember your way through your losses, walking and talking about what you had and no longer have: what you hoped for but cannot seem to realize: who you were and who you now are and who you now can and must become.

And it is in the middle of this vulnerable and human experience that the two on the road are joined by a third person. More mystery. It is Jesus. They are friends and disciples but they don't recognize him. Is it, as some have suggested, that they are walking west into the setting sun and they can't see? Or is it not, as Fred Craddock suggests, that in the midst of the clutter and confusion of the present we often miss the importance of what is happening, thus necessitating the experience of remembering?

In any event, he joins the conversation, asks them what they were discussing. They tell him the events of the last few days: Jesus, our hopes that he was the one, his death, the rumor that he was alive, the clutter and confusion of the present.

And then he, unknown companion, leads them through their own scripture and religious tradition, helps them put what just happened in the context of that larger framework, that is to say, helps them remember.

They invite the stranger to stay. At table he takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and they remember: "their eyes open and they recognized him." And then the experience ends. The stranger disappears "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?"

And instead of staying the night in Emmaus, where they have gone to deal with their grief, that very hour they return to Jerusalem to tell the story, "how he had been made known to them in the breaking of bread." An experience with the risen Lord, a rather common experience of the presence of Jesus Christ, became a source of rebirth for them. Tears became laughter, grief became new energy, new creativity, new commitment, new faith.

I love the way the Bible continues to assure me that faith is a gift given by God, sometimes given by God through other people: a Sunday School teacher, mentor, pastor, confirmation class teacher. Faith is not something you can force or coerce on others, or on yourself, for that matter. You cannot will yourself to have faith, no matter how hard you try, any more than you can will yourself to love. Faith, like love, is a gift. It was one of the more profound theological understandings of the Reformation, namely that our ability to believe in God is a gift of God.

I love the way the Bible assures me that the gift of faith is given in experiences that are fairly ordinary. The Easter event, after all, is not planned and executed with much marketing sense or flair or drama. Why didn't the risen Christ appear to Pilate and Caephas, the chief priest, someone asked. It certainly would have cleared up a lot of misunderstanding. Why not the Temple? That would have been perfect. Why all the ambiguity and uncertainty? Why not some proof for people who mattered, movers and shakers? Why these two anonymous characters? Maybe its because God wants us to know that revelation happens in ordinary ways to ordinary people. Maybe that's the whole point.

The risen Christ comes to those who are trying to follow, trying to love him, trying to be his people, trying to remember. He doesn't come as a proof to powerful but skeptical unbelievers. He comes to his friends, to those who know him, and it is his gift to them.

It is widely held that experiences of deep spiritual significance, experiences of divine revelation, experiences in which we know God, will be always extraordinary experiences, full of drama and mystery. Some of us assume that our spirituality is deficient because we have not had a luminous religious experience. Many of us wait for the voice in the night, the thunder and lightening, the bolt from the blue, the tongues of fire, the moment of crystal clarity, our name spoken by God with precision. At a time of deep spiritual searching, Anne Lamott wrote, "Would it be any skin off God's nose to give me a straight answer, just once?" And I love the way the Bible suggests that it's not always like that, not often like that: that God comes to us in ways that are everyday and ordinary: as common as a late afternoon walk and bread broken and a meal shared.

Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and novelist, has been writing about it all his life. "The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears reveal only. . .a gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being and imagination. . . what we may see is Jesus himself." (*The Magnificent Defeat,* p.87-88)

We watch and wait and anticipate and expect the divine to break into our lives in experiences of extraordinary clarity and lucidity, and sometimes that is what happens: words of a sermon become more than words, become a means of grace; beautiful music by the choir or the symphony orchestra or the soprano soloist becomes more than music, becomes a way the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness penetrates our being, a glorious sunset proclaims the goodness of creation and creator. Thank God for those occasional, extraordinary experiences.

But the Bible is suggesting that Jesus Christ comes to us in ways that are far more modest, in the daily round, in the activities that occupy us, in the people whose faces pass by, in moments of intimacy and passion, in moments of kindness and compassion, in bread broken and meals shared.

He comes particularly, I believe, in moments of high joy and also as we experience loss and as we remember. In her memoir *Traveling Mercies,* Anne Lamott writes about dealing with the death of her father, a process that went on for more than 20 years. She remembers visiting the Rothko Chapel in Houston which she describes as "a small ecumenical sanctuary designed by the great abstract painter, Mark Rothko. . .a deeply sacred space. It is quiet—there are huge Rothko canvases on the walls, purple and wine red. . ." She writes, "I felt like the thing inside was conspiring to get me to stop. . .I've heard that the Holy Spirit very rarely respects one's comfort zones."

In the middle of the experience of sacredness and silence, she began to think about her father. "I saw my dad sitting beside me. He loved silence. He read me Wallace Stevens' great poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" a dozen times over the years." She begins to remember more—the stillness of her father's office, the way he made her feel

great, "It's so different having a living father who loves you, even someone complex and imperfect. After your father dies, defeat becomes pretty defeating. When he's still alive there are setbacks and heartbreaks, but you're still the apple of someone's eye."

And then she begins to experience the loss all over again. "I started to cry, and I cried for a long time. . . Twenty years ago. For twenty years I have ached to go back home, when there was nobody there to whom I could return."

And then, in memory and tears, healing and resurrection begin to happen . . . "The light in the Rothko Chapel was very beautiful and it bathed me. . . The thing about light is that it really isn't yours: it's what you gather and shine back. And it gets more power from reflectiveness: if you sit still and take it in, it fills your cup. And then you can give it off yourself. So I sat still."

And, in the healing of memory, she remembers as a little girl trying to keep up with her father who always walked fast . . . "That's why I naturally walk so fast, and why I sometimes feel I can walk forever." (p.221-228)

That's Anne Lamott's story. You and I have one as well: a story of our losses, our grief, our attempts to live through it, to rise above it, to put life back together. You and I have Emmaus stories of remembering. And the promise is that Jesus Christ comes to us and in him God gives us the gift of faith, the comfort and strength of the resurrection and the power to live with hope and confidence and strength and new life, new energy, new passion, new faith, new being.

In this season of Easter, we continue to be reminded that ordinary moments become sacred moments, that memory clarifies and seals experiences of grace, and that God lives. God lives not in a remote corner of the universe, not on a throne invisible above the clouds, not even in creeds, philosophies, theologies or sermons, but in the world, in the ordinary experiences of your life and mine: in your classroom, your board room, your office, courtroom, jail cell, hospital room, emergency room, your kitchen, your office, your church.

God lives: the risen Christ comes particularly when loss is shattering--in refugee camps in Kosovo, as bread is shared—Christ shared.

Easter is about an empty tomb. And it is about the companion who comes to us on the dusty road to Emmaus, the city streets, comes into our lives to be our guest, our host, our friend, our companion, our Lord.

All praise to him. Amen.

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Give Me That Old Time Religion

April 25, 1999
John M. Buchanan

"Can anyone deny that the theological climate is a factor in the decline and shrinkage of the mainline churches? Many young adults desire an alternative to fundamentalism's intellectual rigor mortis and to assorted mainline mixtures of religious uncertainty and political certainty, but they find a void at the center.... They want more than simple and safe answers.. In the midst of religious and moral chaos, these folk seek a faith that has been tested and found true enough by ample Christian experience for them to live by, to transmit to their children, and to commend shamelessly to their friends."

The Church Confident
Leander E. Keck

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John 10: 1-10, Acts 2: 42-47

> "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." (Acts 2:42, 46b, 47a)

". . . that old time religion" the old gospel song puts it. "It's good enough for me. It was good enough for our mother, good enough for Paul and Silas, . . . that old time religion, and it's good enough for me."

The clear assumption which is widely shared is that old-time religion is somehow superior to whatever it is we currently have—present time religion, modern religion, if you will. What it really is, I think, is nostalgia, the longing each of us experiences for a simpler, less complicated time than the week just past; longing for a world which perhaps never was: a world in which what is going on in Kosovo and what went on in Littleton, Colorado last week never happened; a world of peace and serenity and understanding and tolerance; a world in which people care for one another; a world where compassion and sharing and understanding were the operative realities; a world not unlike the one our earliest spiritual relatives, the very first Christians, valiantly tried to create.

"Give me that old time religion" usually means the world of my personal past, my childhood world before things got so complicated. I propose this morning, however, that "old time" means that time when it all began, when a small group of men and women experienced together the death by crucifixion of their friend and leader and Lord, and who individually and together experienced his presence so that they became convinced that he was risen and present in their lives and in the life of the world: those remarkable people who finally did burst out of their locked rooms in Jerusalem, so full of spirit and energy and courage and love that they turned the world upside down, literally.

I love what Annie Dillard says about them. Writing an essay for a book of contemporary authors on the New Testament, she says that "The Gospel of Luke ends immediately and abruptly on that Easter Sunday when the disciples had walked so much and kept receiving visitations from the risen Christ. The skies have scarcely closed around Christ's heels when the story concludes on the disciples. . . What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity, that here come the Christians already, flawed to the core, full of wild ideas and hurried self-importance. For who can believe in the Christians." (*Incarnation,* edited by Alfred Corn, p.36)

It is, of course, the easiest project in the world to identify what is wrong with Christians in general and the Christian church in particular. Part of being a minister is hearing unhappy church stories. "I haven't been to church for years because my parents made me go every Sunday when I was a child and it was awful." (Probably the all-time favorite.) The second one is "I don't go to church because church people are all hypocrites," or "I don't go to church because all church people do is fight." That's third, and true. The church and its inhabitants are easy targets, and given the fact that the mainline church today, the Episcopalians, Methodists, United Church of Christ, Presbyterians and others continue to decline in numerical strength and stature with the culture, everybody has an opinion about what's wrong with us and has written a prescription in a book.

Leander Keck, retired dean at Yale Divinity School, is the author of one of these, a very thoughtful one, and in it, he observes that "Diagnosing the malaise of the mainline church has become a growth industry. (*The Church Confident,* p.19))

And so, rather than adding to the clutter this morning, let's just go back to that authentic "old time religion," to those very first Christians, and see what we can learn about what they had in mind.

There they were, after the tumultuous events at Passover: the arrest, and trial and public execution of Jesus; the resurrection appearances; the time of fearful waiting and watching in locked rooms, still in Jerusalem; there they were—not very many of them, actually. And on the feast day of Pentecost they ventured out of their hiding place and Peter, full of the Spirit of God, made a speech and the Christian church was launched. The Acts of the Apostles, a history of the early Christian church written by Luke, tells the story. They were together, they held all things in common, they took care of one another, they ate together, they were conspicuously happy, particularly at their common meals, and they had the good will of all the people. And as a result, the movement began to grow dramatically.

They taught and learned. They ate together in a way that attracted attention. The scholars tell us it was the radical openness and hospitality and inclusivity of their table that was so noticeable and controversial and impressive. People who never ate together, rich and poor, men and women, morally pure and morally not-so-pure, clean and unclean, all were welcome. All the barriers were gone in this new community. And they apparently were so full of the love of their Lord that they did the unthinkable—they started to love each other and forgive each other and have compassion for one another. One commentator put it like this: "The combined energy of God's spirit and their love for one another and for those outsiders was irresistible." (*Texts for Preaching,* Charles Cousar.)

People who think and write about church growth perhaps should pay a little more attention to the book of Acts. The earliest Christians simply acted like Christians, like friends and followers of Jesus. They devoted themselves to love and compassion. It doesn't say they devoted themselves to church growth or evangelism. It says they devoted themselves to caring for one another and for others, and the world was compelled by their authenticity, the integrity of the life they lived in the world. Their life together was the very best evangelism.

In fact, they loved one another so much that they shared all they had and established a kind of communal living for a while.

It must have been impressive. Kenneth Woodward, religion writer for *Newsweek*, produced an essay recently, *2000 Years of Jesus,* which highlights the key changes in history that happened because of Christianity and the Christian church. He writes: "Like a supernova, the initial impact of Christianity on the ancient Greco-Roman world produced shock waves that continued to register long after the Roman Empire disappeared."

The church introduced the idea of a God who relates to the world and to individuals in a personal way. They changed forever the way the world regards death and therefore life. They taught the world to value individual human life. Every man and woman and child is precious, they taught and practiced.

The early church protected the children. Under Roman law, fathers could and often did commit infanticide. Female babies were particularly vulnerable because they were nothing but an expense. Rodney Stark, a sociologist at the University of Washington, conducted a study of gravestones at Delphi and discovered that of 600 upper class families, only half a dozen raised more than one daughter. Christians picked up the abandoned babies who were simply left in the gutters to die. Fathers were allowed the option of keeping a baby or banishing it which meant simply setting it outside. The early Christian church became an orphanage for the unwanted babies. Because individuals were precious they did away with a common Roman practice of marrying off 10 year old girls to older men and they carried into the Roman world their Jewish respect for marriage and the then novel notion that it is based on the consent of the man and woman.

In the Roman world virtue was Aristotelian: justice, prudence, courage and temperance. Jesus taught and the early Christians tried to practice humility, forgiveness, compassion, love. They were conspicuous because they cared for those who were expendable: widows, orphans, the aged and infirm.

Professor Stark sees the most dramatic evidence in the high Christian survival rates during the plagues that repeatedly hit the citizens of the ancient Roman Empire. "The Romans threw people out into the street at the first symptom of disease, because they knew it was contagious and they were afraid of dying. But the Christians stayed and nursed their sick."

Before Christ, Professor Stark says, victors in wars routinely butchered their vanquished foes. Christianity suggested that even enemies' lives should be respected and honored.

It is easy to critique the Christian church and the faith which inspired it. Lots went wrong, as Annie Dillard and others remind us. And it is helpful on occasion to be reminded of the enormous and positive and human and good effect the church and the faith have had in the world.

The churches and people of faith started most of the universities and colleges in our nation. A wonderful new hospital was dedicated in our neighborhood last week. The final event of a week of celebrations for the new Northwestern Memorial Hospital was a Sunset Blessing on Sunday evening, an interfaith service of worship. Our Morning Choir

and Tower Brass were there and made us all proud. What impressed me most, however, was the brief history of the early hospitals that combined to create Northwestern Memorial; Passavant, started by a Lutheran minister to take care of the poor of Chicago in the 1880's, and Wesley, started by Methodists at the same time, to care for the sick and needy. The first nurses were Methodist women volunteers. I thought about other great Chicago hospitals with names like Presbyterian, St. Lukes-Episcopal, Loyola, Lutheran General.

I recalled Professor Stark's observations about Christians taking care of plague victims and I remembered a similar story told to us by Korean Presbyterians. Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Korea in 1885 and the first of them, a ~~physician~~ by the name of ~~Horace Un~~derwood, started a hospital in Seoul, Severance Hospital. In 1888 a cholera epidemic struck Korea. And the Korean people did what everybody before them did in response to and fear of infectious diseases, simply put the sick and dying out into the streets. Christianity began to take root in Korea when Christians went into the streets to minister to the sick and picked them up and carried them to Severance Hospital. The king heard about it and sent emissaries to discover who these angels were who were not afraid to care for the sick and dying.

It is all we have to offer the world, after all: an alternative way of thinking and being and relating, a way that is often in sharp contrast to the values of the culture, whether it is Greco-Roman or the consumer, market culture of modern America. It is grounded in our trust in God, our joy at the good news of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ, our deep gratitude that God loves, accepts us, forgives and frees us from anything that inhibits or holds us back or down, our profound thankfulness that in Easter even the power of death was defeated so we can live authentic and courageous lives.

We offer the world Gospel: good news. But the world will not respond, will not be much interested, unless it can see that Gospel reflected in the life of the church.

We respond to the crisis in Kosovo because of that basic Judeo-Christian conviction that any human life is precious and that no one should be exiled, discriminated against, shut out, evicted from their home, raped or killed because of their ethnicity or religion. There are no expendable people.

We respond to poverty and need closer to home. There are no expendable children at Cabrini-Green or the Robert Taylor Homes, either. Each is precious, each a child of God, loved by God, intended by God, willed by God to have a full and safe and healthy life. We invest our energy and time and resources, personally and corporately, as an expression of the Gospel, as an act of faith.

And how shall we respond to the death of the children, to the continuing violence that now seems to be a permanent part of life for the young people and children of our nation? I was struck by Ken Woodward's reminder that one of the things the early church did for the ancient world was help it to change the way it thought about children: protecting children from the customs and mores and morals that put children at risk.

Well, what do we have to say to a culture which so surrounds young people with violence? Is there nothing we can say about the unrelenting violence produced by Hollywood and by

television? Is there anyone who seriously doubts that human life is cheapened and rendered valueless by motion pictures which portray with graphic, bloody detail, the killing, maiming, stalking and blowing up of human beings? Is there nothing to be said or done about popular video games, like "Doom," that allow the player to stalk and blow away victims hiding and running through the halls of a dark dungeon? Is there nothing we can say about the access angry and disturbed youngsters have, on the Internet, to those who would encourage and celebrate that disturbed anger, and provide detailed instructions for constructing pipe bombs?

And guns . . . 200,000,000 guns floating in and through this society: not just hunting rifles, collections of rare guns, target pistols, or registered hand guns owned by people who respect them and know how to use them, but military weapons, semi-automatic pistols whose only purpose is to kill human beings; guns available at enormous gun shows, guns sold legally from trunks of cars, guns easily accessible anywhere in our society, as many as you want to own, an arsenal if that's your plan. The political power of the N.R.A. and the gun lobby is so pervasive that in spite of the majority –72% of gun owners favor some kind of mandatory registration and background checks, 80% of the general population and the vast majority of police want reasonable gun control—the flow of firearms of all types continues uninterrupted into our nation.

These statistics are so distressing that I don't want to believe them. They come from the HELP Network, of which this church is a supporting member and from a recent Louis Harris Poll: In 1996 there were 34,040 firearms deaths in the U.S.A. 4,643 of them were children and teenagers. Every day 12 children die from gunshot wounds in our country.

There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world or in human history.

And this, I find unbelievable: 6% of high school students reported carrying a gun to school within the last 30 days; 9% have shot at someone; 59% say they know how to get a gun.

Louis Harris says we are the gun culture. Under the guise of our rights, the presence of guns and their use to kill will be what defines us historically.

Of course, the availability of guns isn't the whole problem. But somehow to blame schools for not providing value-based education, a silly accusation, actually, in a place like Littleton, Colorado, or parents for not parenting, and to ignore the overwhelming presence and accessibility of guns in our culture is simply irresponsible. It is, I think for us, the moral equivalent of the Roman practice of discarding unwanted infants. Last Friday, Francis Cardinal George called a public meeting on violence reduction. Paul Vallas, CEO of Chicago Public Schools was there, so was the Police Superintendent, State's Attorney, clergy, and community organizations. We were told: "Pay attention to what is happening to us. . . . Care for all the children. And guns . . . we simply must stop the flow of guns.'

So do pray for parents who are burying precious sons and daughters, and for the churches where ministers are trying to preach helpful sermons, and for teachers and school administrators. But also pray that officials of the NRA and the gun lobby will have a change of heart and help us restore decency and responsibility and safety to the world in which our dear children live.

End 4 Christendom 2 Begin 1 Family

And then raise your voice: write your Federal and State representatives, Speaker of the House Hassert and Majority Leader Lott. Let the theater owners hear from you about the previews that assault your senses with obscene and gratuitous violence. And for God's sake, literally, if you own a gun, lock it up, keep it safe.

Hell's Bells → See Manuscript outline A

In recent years, there have been a number of prominent pilgrimages back to the church after years of disaffection. Some are writers who have recorded their experiences: Dan Wakefield, Kathleen Norris, most recently Anne Lamott. And in each case it was not the theology, not even the preacher's sermons, I'm sorry to admit, that did it, but the community, the quality of life lived by the people, the church itself.

Wakefield came home when he discovered that volunteering in a soup kitchen gave him more pleasure than anything else. Norris came home when she rediscovered the earthy wisdom, integrity and honest piety of South Dakota ranchers. Anne Lamott invited Jesus into her life because the African-American women of a small Presbyterian church in Marin County did not judge her, but welcomed her, loved her into health and sobriety by standing with her in a time of serious crisis and in motherhood.

It's what we have to offer and I invite you to it again this morning: to the responsibilities but also the joy of following Jesus Christ as part of his people, his church.

We had a fire around here two weeks ago, on Sunday afternoon, or at least what could have turned into a fire. An elevator motor overheated and smoke was coming up the shaft. We called the fire department and when the firemen arrived they told our house staff to clear the building. Fortunately there weren't many people here. It was about 4:00. But some were here. We have a weekly community supper at 5:30. All are welcome: members, non-members, paying customers and people with no money. A number of our homeless neighbors are a regular part of the community that gathers for the breaking of bread. Some of them come early, waiting for the supper. Our houseman, Roger, found one of them waiting outside the dining room and told him he'd have to leave because there was a fire.

He refused. "No way man. I'm not leaving this church," he said. "I've been waiting all week for this meal and I'm not leaving this church."

> "All who believed were together . . .they broke bread and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Thanks be to God. Amen.